

Chapter Two

St. Margaret of Cortona (1247-1297)

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St. Margaret was born in Laviano, Italy in 1247. Her mother raised her and her brother Bartholomew with great love and tenderness, and taught them to love God and seek a life of virtue. Thus, her mother's death when Margaret was only seven was a tragic blow.

Her father, a farmer, remarried two years later. He was weak and soft on her at times—spoiling Margaret in the process—and excessively violent at others. His new wife had no use for his lively, strong-willed daughter, and attempted with harshness to undo the spoiling her husband had accomplished.

Seeking Love

Caught between her parents' extremes, neither of whom provided the love and affection she had known and which she so desperately wanted, she sought love outside her home. As so often happens with a girl who does not experience adequate love from her father, she looked to the boys of her town for love.

They were quick to respond as she was strikingly beautiful. Her looks, combined with her spirited nature made her irresistible to them. She loved the attention, and to keep it gave in to their sinful desires. Before she was 17 the whole town knew of her sexual adventures.

Mistress

At 17 she was noticed by a nobleman passing through the town and he arranged to meet her. For him it was love at first sight. He offered her gifts and invited her to come live with him in his castle in the hills of Montepulciano. Margaret turned him down, pointing out she was from a poor family and of a much lower class. He suggested that her beauty was worth more than riches, and would be enough for him to marry her. This lie convinced her and off she went. Perhaps she had decided it was time to move on, to get away from the contempt of the women, the sexual advances of the men.

He never fulfilled his promise of marriage, so for the next nine years she lived with him unmarried. Her sinful life shocked the entire region. She added insult to

injury by often riding through the town on a magnificent horse dressed in expensive jewels and fancy clothes. When she gave birth to a son, Margaret gave up on the hope of marriage and resigned herself to her situation.

Not surprisingly, in spite of her somewhat glamorous life, Margaret was often unhappy. She would find an out-of-the-way room in the castle and say to herself, "How good it would be to pray here! ...How well one would do penance here!" She would sit there and cry over her sins, hoping some day to repent and receive God's forgiveness and mercy. Years later, after her conversion, she said, "At Montepulciano I lost honor, dignity and peace; I lost everything but faith." No doubt she kept her faith, if not hope and love, because of the holy efforts of her mother, who often came to her mind.

One day a friend pleaded with her, "You wretch, how much lower will you bring yourself?" She placed her hands over her eyes and let out a miserable cry. Then, almost as if she saw herself in a crystal ball, she proclaimed, "Don't worry! The day will come when you will call me a saint, because I will have become so holy!"

She would give generously to the poor to soothe her troubled conscience. When she was greeted politely in the streets, she sometimes was moved by her conscience to respond that a such honor was more than she was due in light of her evil ways.

For nine years Margaret continued her sinful life, torn between pleasure and guilt, comfort and disgust. She felt trapped. She hid her agony from her lover and others in the house. It was only through tragedy that she was released from her terrible situation.

When she was 26 her nobleman one day didn't come home from a business trip on time. After two days of waiting she was led by his own dog to his bloodstained, murdered body, covered by some branches and leaves in the woods. She cried out in horror and fainted on the spot.

When she came to, she faced squarely the issue of her own death, of divine judgement. Where was her lover's soul now? Was it her fault? Where would she end up for all eternity?

Breaking Free

She resolved to change her life and go home to her father. Dressed in the clothes of a penitent sinner, she took her young son and walked to Laviano. There, she threw herself at the feet of her father and asked forgiveness and shelter. He gave her both, at first.

However, when her step mother heard of it, she wouldn't *think* of it! Her father gave in to his wife, and sent his daughter away.

She walked away leading her young, weeping son, uncertain where she would go. She stopped under a tree and tried to think. She thought of returning to the comfort of her past sinful life. The devil tempted her: "Come back to me. Return to the pleasures of life. You still have your beauty, your youth, your wit... You shall have love, and the world will again pour into your cup delightful pleasures. You will not have to be down on yourself, as your parents have driven you out." It was a tempting thought.

All of a sudden she caught herself, saying, "No, no, Margaret. Don't give your life to shame and regret. You have long enough dishonored your Creator. Long enough have you fought against Him who redeemed you with His blood... Your earthly father has rejected you but your heavenly Father will receive you." She felt moved to go to Cortona and seek refuge with the Franciscans, who were known for their kindness toward repentant sinners. Off they went on foot toward Cortona, 12 miles away.

At the city gate they came upon two kind noblewomen who saw her miserable, tired face, and made friends with her. She told them of her sinful life and of her desire to reform. They were moved by her story and took her and her son to live with them.

Mercy

Soon they brought her to the Franciscan house. There she confessed her sins, pouring out her heart. The holy Franciscan priest, Fr. Giunta, told her of God's tremendous mercy, and how good it was that she had turned away from her former ways. As he gave her absolution she found the peace she had sought for so long.

She humbly asked entry into the Third Order of the Franciscans, that she might do penance for the rest of her life. She was accepted on a trial basis to see if her conversion would be permanent. Fr. Giunta was to be her spiritual director during her trial period, which would last three years.

She attended Mass each day, spent long hours in prayer, worked as a midwife nurse, helping deliver babies, and cared for the poor. She resolved to conquer her body, which, she said, had conquered her. She went to Fr. Giunta with a sharp blade, prepared to scar her beautiful face, which had helped bring her down. The priest would not hear of it. She wanted to be called "the poor sinner," or "the great sinner" by all.

She felt the urge to do public penance for her sins, and proposed to her director that she go to Montepulciano, where she had lived in sin for so long, to seek forgiveness of the people. She wanted to go there wearing rags, with her hair shaved off, and her face covered. She would have a woman lead her around the town by a

rope, saying, “Look at this terrible sinner, who by her vanity, pride and scandals has ruined so many souls in this city.”

Again, Fr. Giunta refused her request. He did, however, allow her to go back to her home town, Laviano, for a lesser display of penitence. After Mass, before the whole congregation gathered there, she appeared with a rope at her neck and threw herself down before a woman of the nobility whose godly advice she had always scorned, and begged forgiveness for her shameful behavior. She was so humble and sorrowful in her request that many began to weep.

The woman was so moved by this display of contrition that she brought Margaret to her house and heard the young woman tell her how wonderful the Third Order of Franciscans was. Margaret was so convincing that the noblewoman agreed to join herself.

Franciscan at Last

After Margaret had spent three years in great prayer and penance, Father Giunta agreed she was ready to join the Franciscans. In 1276, at the age of 29, Margaret entered the Third Order of Penance of St. Francis.

She made three resolutions: to beg for all the money she needed to live on (and give any excess away); to do twice as many penances; and to ask of the woman who was providing her shelter, for a more miserable and private room in which to live. After she sent her son off to school, she was given a small shack next to the Franciscan church. She began to live a life of deep penance, wearing rags for clothing, sleeping on the ground with a stone or piece of wood as a pillow, and seeking to humiliate herself in every possible way.

She ate only a slice of bread and some water with some uncooked vegetables. She denied herself all comforts, wearing a hair shirt and whipping herself to bring under control the body which for so long had held her prisoner to sin. She spent most nights meditating on the sufferings of Christ and shedding tears for her past sins.

Every day she would go early to the church to pray the Divine Office with the Franciscans and attend their Mass. She took Holy Communion every day. Then she would meditate on the “book of love,” namely the crucifix, the book “written in every language... or, better, the language of the heart,” “...with the blood of Christ.” In the evenings she would return to the church for prayer, sometimes continuing through the night.

When she was at prayer in the church the Lord began to speak plainly to her. As she prayed one night in the empty church, she poured out her heart in prayer with words such as , “My God, you have suffered so much for me, will you forgive me?” She immediately heard a voice from the crucifix say, “What do you want, My poor

sinner?”

She replied, “Lord Jesus, I seek only You.”

She thought about the title Jesus gave her, “My poor sinner.” She wondered if she still had more to make up for her sins after her years of prayer and penance. She turned to St. Francis of Assisi, asking him to pray for her before God that by her prayer and fasting the debt of her sins would be completely removed. Less than a week later, after receiving holy communion, Margaret heard a voice within her describing her life and then saying, “I, the Son of the Eternal Father... absolve you from all the sins you have committed until this day.” He told her that her sins were totally forgiven and their temporal punishment was removed as well. She was overcome with joy.

A short time later Margaret was in her little shack reflecting on the patience and kindness God had shown her after all her sins. She prayed, “Lord, how is it that you cast your eyes on me who am only dust and ashes...?” She heard the Lord say, “I went searching in the lowest depths of this world, and chose you because I wish to exalt the humble, to set sinners straight, to make noble that which is low.”

She asked further, “But, why grant so many favors to such a terrible creature?”

Hope for Sinners

“Because I have chosen you to be the net of sinners. I want you to be a light to those in the darkness of habitual evil; I want the example of your conversion to preach hopefulness to those who are despairing... I want ages to come to be convinced that I am always ready to open My arms of mercy to the prodigal son who returns to Me in the sincerity of his heart.”

Soon after Margaret was helping a young mother in the home of a friend. She took a moment out to pray and weep over her sins. As she prayed she went into ecstasy and was lifted two or three feet off the ground. Two people were present and were amazed at what they saw. Margaret begged them not to tell anyone what they had seen. She decided then to end her work as nurse to the wealthy, believing because she was a member in the Third Order she should work among the poor instead.

The devil did not give up on Margaret after her conversion. He appeared to her as an angel of light and reminded her of her life of pleasure at Montepulciano, and how poor she was now. He warned her not to try to become so holy saying, “Better to follow the common way, as do the other Third Order members.” He suggested it was enough for her to be saved, she need not strive for holiness (to which we are all called).

Margaret told him, “Be quiet,” adding “The Lord has taught me the way of

penance; He has promised me, if I continue on in this way, an eternal glory. My choice is made. Go away!" At that he left her.

But, he would be back. The next time he cackled and danced, sang impure songs, mixed with curse words and inviting Margaret to repeat them. She turned away. Then he appeared to her as a kind of dragon, spewing forth fire and telling her "You are damned! You are damned!" She took a burning stick from the fireplace and tried to drive him out with that, but it had no effect. Then she made the sign of the cross and he left immediately. But, as he left he threw some poison which got into her eyes and she was in pain for over an hour.

A third time he tempted her with pride, saying, "You are a saint. Everyone honors you!" She ran out of her little house and shouted out her past sins for all in the town to hear. The devil was beaten again.

At last he told her, "Your whole life is an illusion. The sweetness you have tasted is from me and not from Jesus." She began to wonder. She asked Fr. Giunta for advice and he told her to make the sign of the cross when she heard the voice which had been guiding her, and say, "If you are a spirit of darkness turned into an angel of light, be quiet and go away." Jesus then spoke to her and told her that He alone could give her such divine sweetness. At that moment light beams of truth entered her mind and she was filled with a heavenly peace. The temptations from the Satan had lasted several years.

For some time Jesus called her, "my poor little one," but she had asked Him for a more intimate title, that of daughter. He told her, "You cannot yet receive from me the sweet name of daughter, for you are the daughter of sin. When by means of another general confession you will have completely purified yourself from your sins, I will number you among my daughters."

She prayed to St. Francis of Assisi and Mary Magdalene for grace and a deeper contrition. Then she made her general confession to her priest, Fr. Giunta. It took her eight days to complete it. Then, on December 27, 1276, she received Communion wearing a rope at her throat (beneath her clothing) something a criminal would wear.

New Titles

Jesus then called her, "My daughter!" This change filled Margaret with such great delight that she feared she might die. She spent the next day in ecstasy, and from that point on she had an ever greater sorrow for her sins.

Once Our Lord said to her, "My daughter, I will place you among the Seraphs, among the virgins whose hearts are flaming with the love of God."

"How can that be," she asked, "since I have spoiled myself with so many sins?"

“My daughter, your many penances have purified your soul from all the effects of sin to such a degree that your contrition and sufferings will restore you to the purity of a virgin.”

Margaret then asked Him, “...and is Mary Magdalene among the virgins in heaven?”

Jesus answered her, “Except for the Virgin Mary and Catherine the Martyr [of Alexandria] there is no one among the virgins greater than Magdalene.”

Another time Jesus told her, “My daughter, you are a rose among flowers. You are pure, and for your love of chastity, I have placed you among the virgins.” (H 17)

Margaret prayed for the grace to “humble herself before all creatures” for the love of God. The Lord agreed, saying, “This humbling of yourself will exalt you among the blessed in heaven... You are the third light [of the Franciscan Order]” (After St. Francis, and St. Clare).

One day as she prayed, she proclaimed how unworthy she was to receive His gifts because of her evil past. “Remember,” He answered, “I can give my gifts to whomever I please. Have you forgotten Mary Magdalen the sinner, the Samaritan woman, the Canaanite, Matthew the tax collector, whom I made an apostle, and the good thief, to whom I promised paradise?”

Since Father Giunta had refused her request to destroy her beauty she asked God to remove from her any graces that others might admire in her. But the Lord said to her that by these gifts “He wished to encourage sinners to be converted, and thus to contribute to His glory.”

There is a lesson here for parents: if and when their daughters begin to be attractive, they should warn them of the dangers of their emerging beauty. Beauty can be a curse or a blessing. If a young woman allows herself to be drawn into the evil which godless men will propose, taken as they are by her beauty, it is a curse (as it was for Margaret in her early years). She will have many trials in life if she allows this.

But, if she gives her beauty back to God, that is, if she becomes holy through prayer and the Mass and the sacraments, and then uses her beauty to draw others to God and His own awesome beauty by speaking of the joy God has brought her in prayer, what a marvelous blessing! God (as we shall see in the “new” Margaret) will richly reward such goodness.

After raising her to the title of “my daughter,” the Lord gave Margaret many other titles, including, “mother of sinners,” “lily of innocence,” “rose of charity,” His “sister,” and “pearl of his heart.” However, her most treasured title was “spouse.” She received this as follows: Her Guardian Angel came first and requested her consent to her marriage to the Lord. After hesitating, doubting she was worthy, she gave

consent, trusting in God's will. The wedding would take place some time after.

The wedding occurred one August day within a week of the feast of the Assumption. After receiving the Eucharist in her little shack because she was sick, she received a magnificent white robe, a wedding ring and a crown from the Lord's angels. She proclaimed the words Peter had spoken, "O Jesus, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Then Christ answered, "And I declare, you are my spouse." To complete this marriage He placed His throne deep within her heart.

Before leaving the Lord told her, "Margaret, glorify me and I shall glorify you. Love Me and I shall love you..." This "mystical marriage," is, according to St. John of the Cross, the highest spiritual state possible, in which the soul is constantly aware God's presence and love. It is this marriage with God which we are all invited to (Isaiah 62:4, 5).

In the spring of 1277 the bishop of Arezzo, who had received his title illegally, and who was a political leader first and a man of war, not peace, was about to attack Cortona. He claimed unjustly the right to rule it. Margaret heard of his plan and prayed intensely to God that her city might be spared. On May 5, 1277 the Lord appeared to her and declared, "I appoint you as peace-maker. You are to warn the bishop that he should fulfill his duties as bishop, he should let his troops go, and he should make peace with Cortona. Woe to him if he does not obey!"

Margaret was afraid to do this. After all, she was just a poor reformed sinner. But when Jesus appeared to her again on the 11th of May with more urgency, she accepted her mission and warned the bishop. It was a pleasant surprise that the bishop was convinced by Margaret's message: he made peace with Cortona in July.

All sorts of people came to ask Margaret's prayers and many miracles occurred at her intercession. One woman came to ask Margaret's prayers for her son who had just died. After sharing in the mother's grief, Margaret told her "Go, your child is cured." She went home and found him alive and well.

Another time when parents brought their son, possessed by a devil, from another city to Margaret in Cortona, the devil left him as they approached the town. He indicated he could not stand the air filled with Margaret's prayers. When the family went on to Cortona to thank Margaret, she humbly replied, "Give credit only to God a miracle to which my sins and ingratitude could only place an obstacle."

At one point the Lord made known to her miraculously that a man in the town had just hanged himself. She and friends went immediately to his house and cut him down just in time.

She showed great love for the poor, depriving herself of almost everything she had—including her coat in mid-winter, which she sent to a poor man too proud to beg—to provide for them. She said, "For my brothers the poor I would give

everything, even my life, for I bear them all in my heart.”

She founded a hospital in 1286, with the help of many of the important and wealthy people of Cortona. She worked there as a nurse, preferring to serve those with the most disgusting diseases. She founded a group of Third Order Franciscans in Cortona, popularly called “The Little Poor Sisters,” to serve at the hospital. They were approved by bishop Ubertini on May 26, 1286. Margaret herself wrote the Rule.

She founded another group, the confraternity of Our Lady of Mercy, to not only provide for the material needs of the hospital, but also serve the City's poor, especially those too shy to ask. They were to take particular care of the Franciscans when ill; and, in time of civil war, they were to band together to promote peace. The Blessed Mother was to be their guide, and they were to seek the good of all, without seeking any recognition for themselves.

As a mother, Margaret was careful never to spoil her son, but to raise him with loving discipline. She first cooked with great care the food for the poor, and only when they had been served would she provide for her son, and his meal was uncooked. When he entered the Franciscans in 1283, she wrote to him urging him, among other things, to strive always for humility, to pray with great zeal, and to control his “sensual appetites,” so as to give his heart entirely to God.

Shortly after entering, one morning the young man overslept and missed the start of prayer. The superior had to wake him up by tapping him with a stick. The boy woke all of a sudden and instinctively grabbed the stick and broke it. Then, realizing what he had done, he asked forgiveness and slapped his own face. Margaret somehow knew and sent him a message to come to her. When he arrived she scolded him for his failure to be at prayer promptly. He accepted her correction well.

On one Good Friday Margaret was given visions of the Passion of our Lord. People gathered around her in the church as she seemed to experience every pain of Jesus, her arms outstretched as if on the cross herself. At 3:00 pm she seemed to almost die. The people in the church cried uncontrollably. When she came to her senses, she gave thanks to God for this privilege. However, when she saw all the people gathered around her she was disappointed that so many had seen this precious moment she shared with the Lord.

Nonetheless, the Lord said to her, “Relax, My daughter, I want you to be the mirror of sinners, even the most stubborn. I want them to be convinced by your example that My merciful heart is always open to those who repent.”

“Lord, when your glory and the salvation of souls are at stake, I joyfully submit.”

On Easter she was moved by the Spirit to ask Fr. Giunta as he was preaching, “Do you know where my Savior is, my crucified Jesus?” echoing the words of Mary Magdalene. “Console yourself,” he answered, “...He will not be slow to show

Himself to you.” The next day Jesus appeared to her in His glorified body, filling her with peace and tremendous joy.

Nobles, poor people, priests came from all over, Rome, Florence, but not just Italy; they came from France and Spain as well to see Margaret and ask for her prayers and advice. Fr. Giunta was swamped with the many people who wanted to go to confession after they visited with her.

She asked her guardian angel once, “...let me know by what signs I can distinguish the true friends of God, that is to say, the elect.”

Her angel responded, “He is one of the elect whose heart is detached from every unreasonable earthly desire, is united to its Creator, tends without ceasing toward Him and sighs only for Him.

“But,” continued Margaret, “what virtues should he possess?”

“...the following three virtues: a deep humility, like that of Jesus crucified; perfect charity; extreme purity of heart. He who denies himself, crucifies himself, not with nails but with the denial of self will, and is willing to suffer, to shed his blood if necessary, to proclaim his faith. He... has compassion with the sufferings of the poor, hates falsehood, and flies with horror from impurity. Finally, he takes upon himself the pains of others, and is saddened or rejoices with them without ever yielding to envy.”

Margaret sometimes expressed sadness when Jesus did not appear to her. He appeared to her after that and told her, “Margaret, you want heaven here on earth. Bear in mind that this cannot be. Life on earth is for hard work and temptation; and if at times I give you the consolation of My presence, you must not forget that you must also at times walk in darkness and suffer.”

Another time Jesus spoke to Margaret as follows: “My child, why do you seek to find a paradise here on earth when I denied it to My own body, united though it was to My Divinity? You must not hope for this for in no way can it be given you. You are like Peter, who having seen My glory on Mt. Tabor, wanted in the [delight] of his soul to build there three tents and to live there because of the sweetness which filled his soul. And, as his desire was not fulfilled, so neither can you possess here on earth the paradise I have promised you in the life to come.”

Jesus appeared to her once with His crown of thorns, and holes in his hands and feet as he appeared on Good Friday. Margaret called out, “Ah., Lord, let me be crucified with You!” Jesus replied, “Yes, you shall be martyred with Me... But it is not your flesh but your heart which shall be crucified.” Then He gave her a vision of an old shack on a nearby hill and told her she was to live there alone.

Despite the protests of her fellow religious and the Franciscans, on May 1, 1288, Margaret climbed the hill with a friend and moved into that miserable house. There,

the Lord appeared to her and urged her, “Go, be the angel of peace and the apostle of my mercies. I want you to preach peace to the people of Cortona. Warn them that if they do not do penance, the arm of my justice will rest heavily upon them.” He also told her to have Fr Giunta preach the need for peace in Cortona and that He would be with him. Margaret felt unworthy of her mission but was totally obedient. She went out and shouted in the streets, “People of Cortona, do penance and make peace with your enemies.”

The people responded magnificently. Alas, when she also warned Bishop Ubertini not to carry out his plans to wage war on Florence, he ignored her and went to war. He was killed, his army destroyed, and his body hung from the arch of a church in Florence.

Shortly after she moved to her mountain home Margaret began to suffer a great deal. Her consolations were taken away, she had no one to speak to most of the time, her miracles ended as did her prophecies.

People began to be critical of her and ridicule her. Some were upset that the Franciscans spent so much effort to guide such a sinner. Others claimed she practiced witchcraft or was mentally ill, or was possessed.

One woman came to see her and reminded her harshly of her former sins, and accused her of hypocrisy. Margaret responded by praying for her, asking God to forgive her, and doing what she could to help her. Indeed, she prayed for *all* her critics, and forgave them in her heart. She said, “The insults I endure for the love of God seem sweeter to me than honey, and pour more delight into my soul than all consolations.” She prayed to God, “Forgive them all, Lord... If you need a victim, Lord, take me. Let the blows of your justice fall on my head, but let theirs be spared.”

The Franciscans themselves were divided as to Margaret’s spiritual state. Fr. Giunta stood up for her, but others believed she had fooled him. The case of Margaret was brought up at the Provincial Chapter in 1288, and although the new Provincial was a believer in Margaret’s holiness, to avoid criticism, he decided to limit Fr. Giunta’s contact with her to once every eight days.

Two years later another leader was elected, who re-assigned Fr. Giunta to Siena, so Margaret was completely deprived of her spiritual guide. Two others took his place, but Margaret was broken-hearted.

Margaret began to feel terrible dryness in prayer, as if God were not even hearing her. She begged God to show Himself to her again, but he remained hidden. For almost a year this went on, and then finally Jesus spoke to her. She asked Him, “Why have you abandoned me so long?”

Jesus answered, “I have not abandoned you. I am always near you, but you want to nourish yourself on the milk of consolations and it is necessary, that being the

daughter of My Heart, you should be drenched with gall along with Me.” He told her that her continuing to pray when everything seemed so dry gave Him more honor and benefitted her more since she served Him, as He said, “not according to your taste but according to mine. Earth is a place of combat and I do not want you to taste there the delights of Paradise.”

“Ah, Lord,” she answered, “Where you are, there is Paradise.” After this appearance of the Lord, Margaret had the joy and peace of being always in God’s presence, even while experiencing the trials which so often come with that intimacy. She lived the life of a contemplative, pouring out her heart in prayer and penance in her mountain retreat, far from the company of others.

It is said that she imitated there the prayer and penance that St. Mary Magdalene offered during the final 30 years of her life in a cave in Provence (France). One July 21, the evening before the saint’s feast day, the Lord appeared to her with Mary Magdalene and said to Margaret, “See the one whom I pardoned in the house of the Pharisee? That silvery robe which covers her shoulders, those diamonds which sparkle in her crown, behold the price of her penance in the cave.”

At one point Jesus appeared to Margaret and told her, “All that you ask of the Father in My name you will obtain. “Cortona,” He said, “Deserved to be punished, but due to the love and honor it gives to you, I will spare it...”

Margaret had a great love for the Eucharist, and loved to “run to the source of Divine love,” as she put it, that is, the tabernacle. After her conversion she received Communion often and when she entered the Third Order, she had been given permission by Fr. Giunta to receive every day, an unusual privilege for that time. She would arrive at church at 6 am and spent two or three hours in prayer before Mass. She spent a long time after Communion in near ecstasy, giving thanks for the great Gift she had received.

Once as she was approaching communion she stopped as she felt she might be unworthy. She prayed to God for guidance and heard Jesus within her say, “Pure are the rays which the sun sends to the earth; purer still should be the soul which receives Communion.” He then expressed sadness about the lack of reverence toward Him among some people, but then reassured Margaret that He “delighted to dwell” within her. “Receive Communion without fear,” He told her.

It was after communion that Jesus spoke to her most intimately and that she experienced the delightful ecstasies. It was then that Jesus gave her His most wonderful gifts and great insights into His Divinity.

She once told her spiritual director, Fr. Giunta, “With the strength I receive [at the tabernacle] nothing would stop me [from martyrdom] and I would count as nothing the most terrible tortures. What should I not do for love of my Jesus?”

In late 1296 Fr. Giunta returned to Cortona from Siena, where he had been sent in 1290. She had predicted he would return before her death. Her health had already begun to fail: she had rheumatism and suffered a constant fever.

On January 3, 1297 an angel appeared to her and told her, "...on the 22nd of February, at the first glimpse of dawn, you shall fly toward the home of the saved, where the mercy of God has reserved for you a place of honor." Margaret was filled with joy at the thought.

When she later doubted that God could honor her after her former life of sin, Jesus appeared to her and told her "Be reassured, it is your good guardian angel who has spoken to you, and what he told you will be fulfilled. The exalted Virgin Mary, St Francis, St Mary Magdalen and the whole heavenly court call upon me to hasten the day of your entry into Paradise, and I have resolved to hear them." She was overjoyed at this news. The devil tried to tempt her one last time, but her friends comforted her and Fr. Giunta brought her communion every day.

For the final 17 days of her life her only food was the Holy Eucharist. Everyone in the town wanted to come to visit this holy woman as she lay on her death bed, and scores of people had the privilege. She spoke kind words of encouragement to each with the sweetest smile.

On the evening of February 21 Fr. Giunta anointed her. She said tender goodbyes to her fellow Franciscans and asked forgiveness for the shameful sins of her youth, and urged them to bless God with her for His infinite mercy. Before dawn the next day the holy priest brought her Viaticum. As the first rays of dawn appeared she passed from this life, eager to join her beloved Lord in the eternal marriage of His Kingdom.

At the very time of her death a holy monk who lived in Castello was given a vision of her soul rising up to heaven as a sphere of fire, accompanied by a number of souls who had been set free from Purgatory by the merits of her sufferings. The monk called out to her "The New Magdalen." It was February 22, 1297. She was 50 years old.

Almost immediately miracles began to occur at her tomb, including the raising to life of twelve persons when people prayed for them there. More than a hundred people were cured when they prayed to her.

Her own body remains incorrupt, that is, whole and without decay to this day, and can be seen beneath the main altar of the Basilica of Cortona, "St. Margaret's," named in her honor. She was canonized in 1728.

Reflection

Margaret of Cortona fell into the sad pattern of the beautiful girl who never got the love she needed at home. So, she sought it outside home and was willing to sin to keep it. She misused her gift and found misery.

But, by the mercy of God, she was given the chance to start over. She took back her gift from the world and gave it to God. He had a better use for it, a noble one: to save souls. This brought her happiness, true, lasting happiness.

But, even after her conversion, Margaret had an important lesson to learn, one that Jesus Himself taught her: You can't find heaven on earth. Although we receive tastes of heaven here, as Peter, James and John did at the Transfiguration, we must "also at times walk in darkness and suffer." Why? Because we share in the mission of Christ, to make reparation for the sins of the world. Once we resign ourselves to that truth, we will understand life so much better.

Margaret is truly a saint for today. Her life dramatically illustrates the power of God's grace. Our sins—be they sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, drug or alcohol abuse, or even abortion—leave their permanent scars on our hearts, our minds and even our bodies. But the blood of Christ can wipe clean our *souls* so that no scar, no trace of sin remains.

With our persevering love and repentance Christ can raise us from the depths of sin to the heights of holiness, as he raised Margaret and others such as St. Augustine and St. Mary Magdalene. Best to be sinless and deeply loving as our Blessed Mother was, but better to be a repentant sinner who loves much than one who has sinned little but loves little. "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

Sources

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